

Webster gloomy on survival of Gorbachev

The Washington Post _____
 The New York Times _____
 The Washington Times _____
 The Wall Street Journal _____
 The Christian Science Monitor _____
 New York Daily News _____
 USA Today _____
 The Chicago Tribune _____
Boston Globe P. 2
 Date 31 MAY 1991

By Stephen Kurkjian
 GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON - William H. Webster, the departing director of central intelligence, delivered a gloomy assessment yesterday of President Mikhail Gorbachev's chances of surviving the deteriorating political and economic conditions in his country.

Webster also said the momentum of five or six Soviet republics toward independence from Moscow's government is increasing so rapidly that the Soviet Union "could be in a different shape" by the end of the year.

His pessimistic outlook contrasted with the Bush administration's reluctance to openly discuss Gorbachev's chances for survival. It also came a day before President Bush is to meet with three Soviet economists about plans to reform the USSR's economy.

Webster spoke in a wide-ranging interview with national security reporters on the eve of his retirement from the CIA, which he has headed since 1987.

He also said he was concerned that continued unrest inside the Soviet Union could increase the risk that part of its nuclear arsenal could somehow fall into the hands of rebel groups.

"Could their assets fall into unfriendly hands as a result of internal struggles?" Webster asked. "We see them paying more attention to this in ways that would suggest they're not as confident" as they once were. "This is an area we're going to have to watch very carefully."

While declining to say whether the United States should provide economic or other assistance to help Gorbachev, Webster said he was troubled by Gorbachev's slowness in instituting market reforms or improving the country's infrastructure.

Moscow still does not have a broad game plan for the needed changes, he said, and the country's telecommunications and transportation systems remain archaic. As much as 40 percent of the

country's agricultural products perish from spoilage because of poor roads and delivery systems, he said.

While noting that Gorbachev has tilted in recent weeks away from the hardliners and toward the political and economic reformers, Webster said, "The question is: Is it too late for Gorbachev?"

"Gorbachev's future is increasingly uncertain," he said. While Gorbachev brought profound changes to the Soviet Union, which were praised by Western democracies, he also released a "set of forces," such as a drive toward democracy, independence and economic improvement, that went beyond his vision, Webster said.

On other topics, Webster said:

■ He was "cautiously optimistic" about signs that Iran is seeking a reconciliation with the West and that a deal might be worked out to release Americans long held hostage in Lebanon. "There are enough bubble signs that are reminiscent of other times when hostages were released," Webster said, adding that the matter was too sensitive for elaboration.

■ President Saddam Hussein of Iraq remains "very much in charge" in Iraq, and there is no indication that a public uprising will overthrow him in the near future. Hussein has begun to make desperately needed repairs to the country's infrastructure, particularly bridges and electrical systems destroyed by the allies' massive bombing campaign during the Gulf War.

■ Despite record seizures by law enforcement officers, the international narcotics business continues to flourish. The growth of illegal crops and narcotics production is stronger than ever, Webster said.

■ When international terrorists plotted the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Scotland, other terrorists planned to carry out similar acts. However, Webster said, the conspiracies were aborted by arrests in Europe.